

BAYOU TECHE BRIDGE
Spanning Bayou Teche
Ruth
St. Martin Parish
Louisiana

HAER NO. LA-8

HAER
LA,
50-RUTH,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Department of the Interior
Southeast Region
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

HAER
LA,
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Bayou Teche Bridge

HAER No. LA-8

Location: Spanning Bayou Teche
Ruth, St. Martin Parish, Louisiana

Date of Construction: 1932

Present Owner: State of Louisiana

Present Use: Vehicular bridge

Significance: Bayou Teche Bridge is the oldest existing steel I-beam swing span in Louisiana. This bridge is 246 feet long and 15 feet wide. A hand-operated, equal arm swing span bridge, it was designed for a live load of 7.5 tons. The steel swing span is 106 feet long, the remaining length being made up of timber trestle approaches. The bridge was altered when a column bracing (guywires) was added. Routine maintenance has included the replacement of pilings.

Project Information: This documentation was undertaken in 1985 in accordance with a Memorandum of Agreement as a mitigative measure prior to demolition.

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The Bayou Teche Bridge at Ruth was constructed over what has been termed "the loveliest of Southern streams." It flows through the heart of Louisiana, better known as "Cajun County."

Bayou Teche is presently a small stream occupying the highest part of a large alluvial ridge. The bayou is a 125-mile long body of water extending from Bayou Courtableau at Port Barre to its confluence with the Atchafalaya River at Berwick, Louisiana.

Teche means "snake." This comes from an old Indian legend of the Attakapas, who were the first to inhabit the bayou. Legend goes that a great silver snake had once twisted over the country. The Indians, afraid of it, decided to destroy it. A thousand warriors shot arrows into the snake and beat it with clubs. In its writhing, the snake cut deep grooves in to the soil, in which water accumulated. The stream took the name of Teche, Indian for snake. This was later softened by the French and pronounced "Tesh" (Kane, 1943).

The bridge at Ruth crosses the Teche in St. Martin Parish, which was established in 1811. St. Martin Parish was the first settling place for many of the Acadians, or Cajuns who came to south Louisiana from Nova Scotia when they were deported in 1755. Between 1765 and 1780, they settled around the two trading posts that existed in the area, Poste des Attakapas (now St. Martinville) and Poste des Opelousas (now Opelousas).

When Spain took over the area around 1769, colonization was encouraged through the granting of land, cattle, and provisions. The region prospered under Spanish rule.

In 1801, Spain ceded Louisiana to France. In 1807, Louisiana was divided into 19 parishes, St. Martin being one of them. In 1812, Louisiana was admitted to the Union as a State. Settlers developed their own way of life, unique in many aspects. Cooking, customs, and house styles, had come from a mixture of French, Spanish, and Indian influence. It was mostly the French, though, that had the greatest influence and it can still be seen today along Bayou Teche.

The settlement of Ruth probably had very humble beginnings. It is mentioned in Fortier's Louisiana as "a post-hamlet and station in the western part of St. Martin Parish on the Southern Pacific Railroad about 10 miles north of St. Martinville" (Fortier, 1909). The settlement probably started as a stop for the railroad, established through the area in 1882 and/or as a sugar plantation. In the 1898-99 State of the Sugar Crop Made in Louisiana by Alcee Bouchereau, there is a listing for the R. Martin Sugar Company Ltd. in Ruth, Louisiana. This is the first listing in these records. The company was owned by R. Martin and there was a train stop listed as Ruth. It seems likely that this settlement started out as a sugar plantation because St. Martin Parish is in the heart of what was Louisiana's "Sugar Bowl."

Sugar cane cultivation probably came to Louisiana in 1751 with the Jesuits. They brought the plant from St. Domino and established a plantation in New Orleans. Others grew cane, but crops were not very profitable and the sugar made was of poor quality. The growing of cane almost died out except for those who grew it to supply the market for chewing and for making taffia, a native name for rum.

One man, Ron Antonio Mendez, continued to grow cane in considerable quantities. Mendez had attempted to make sugar, but failed. In 1791, he employed a man named Morin, who had made sugar in St. Domino. With Morin's guidance, Mendez managed to produce a few barrels of sugar.

Although Mendez was one of the first to make sugar in Louisiana, Etienne DeBore was the first to make sugar in great quantities and the first to make a profit. In 1795, he produced a crop worth \$12,000.00. He was also the first in Louisiana to granulate sugar. DeBore set the stage for what would be termed the grand era of Louisiana sugar.

The sugar industry thrived in Louisiana during the antebellum period. New methods were developed to manufacture. New machinery was invented to aid in the process. Plantations sprang up all over south Louisiana and many planters became wealthy. The industry prospered until the start of the Civil War. Young men went off to fight. Many slaves, depended upon for labor, ran away. Crops were burned by the Union army, or there was just no money to plant them. By the end of the war, the sugar industry was nearly wiped out. Sugar planters persisted, though, and the industry eventually thrived again.

It was after the war, in the late 1800s, that Ruth Plantation began. It prospered in the early years of the twentieth century and was still in business when the present bridge over Bayou Teche was built. In Bouchereau's Statement of the Sugar Crop Made in Louisiana, Ruth Plantation was mentioned from 1898 until 1912. In 1906, the plantation changed hands, being taken over by the Chauffee Brothers, Rene and Florian. Another reference is made to Ruth Sugar Company in 1936, in letters written by the company to a Dr. Kerr of Franklin, Louisiana. The letterhead shows the Ruth Sugar Company, Inc. to have offices in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana, and also gives reference to the Ruth Station of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

The Ruth Sugar Mill was listed in Bouchereau as being constructed of wood and metal. It is shown to be a DE, V, and C mill. This means it was a double effect, vacuum strike pan, and centrifugal mill. These terms refer to the method by which the sugar was manufactured.

The vacuum pan process was introduced by T. A. Morgan in 1830. This process is used to extract water from the cane juice. Usually a single pan is used, but a method of using two pans was developed, therefore, the term "double effect." The centrifugal was used to separate the crystalized sugar from the

molasses. The sugar goes into the centrifugal many times before it becomes standard white uniform sugar.

The bridge over Bayou Teche at Ruth was completed around 1934. It is not known precisely why the bridge was constructed in this location. It was probably put here because of the mill and the railroad station, which would have employed quite a few people. These people would need to have a quick route to and from work and there were not many bayou crossings at the time.

The Bayou Teche Bridge at Ruth was constructed during one of the most prolific bridge building periods of Louisiana's history. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the State constructed 1,583 miles of concrete roads, 718 miles of asphalt roads, 2,816 miles of gravel roads, and 111 bridges. This construction came about as a byproduct of the governorship of Huey Pierce Long in the early 1930s.

Long knew that Louisiana needed roads and bridges. The highway system in the State was deplorable, and the Highway Commission had no money to build and repair roads and bridges. Long was able to secure the needed money by getting a bond issue passed. This was no small feat, as many in government were opposed to using the bond issue to pay for roads. Nevertheless, the bond issue passed.

Although of the many bridge projects undertaken at this time were major structures spanning large waterways, the Bayou Teche Bridge at Ruth was one of the smaller projects.

The bridge itself was built from standard plans developed by Louisiana's Department of Transportation and Development, then known as the Highway Commission, and was constructed by the Maintenance Department. It is a rolled steel I-beam, hand-cranked, swing span, the oldest in Louisiana.

The bridge is 249 feet long and 15 feet wide. A hand-operated, equal arm swing span bridge, it was designed for a live load of 7.5 tons. The steel swing span is 106 feet long, the remaining length being made up of timber trestle approaches.

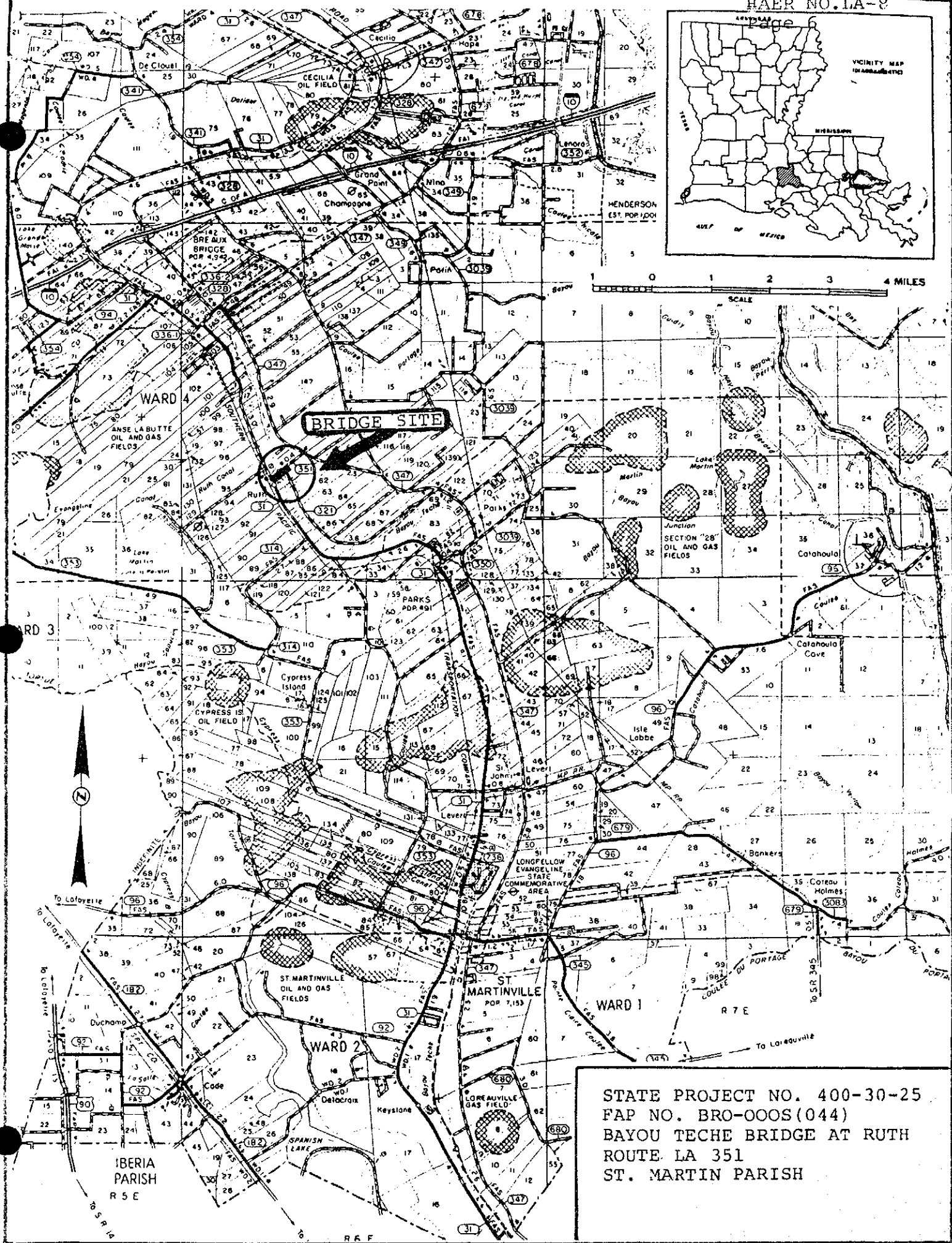
The bridge has been altered. Originally, there were channel markers on either side of the bridge, used to protect it from collision. These were constructed of three timber pilings, about 12 to 18 inches in diameter, attached together. These were necessary at a time when the bayou was more frequently utilized by boat traffic than it is today. These markers have since been removed. A column with bracing (guywires) has been added. Routine maintenance has included the replacement of pilings.

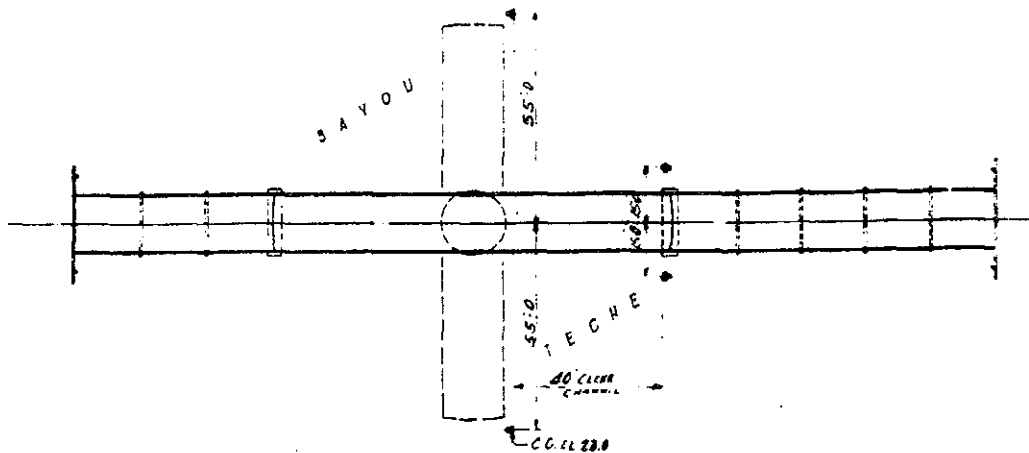
The bayou is navigable at this point, although the swing bridge is not often opened for boat traffic. Being hand cranked, the bridge is opened from the

middle of the span, using manpower. Two long metal poles called catstans are attached to the capstan at the middle of the bridge, above the pivot pier. The bridge is opened by men pushing on the catstans in opposition to each other, until the span is open.

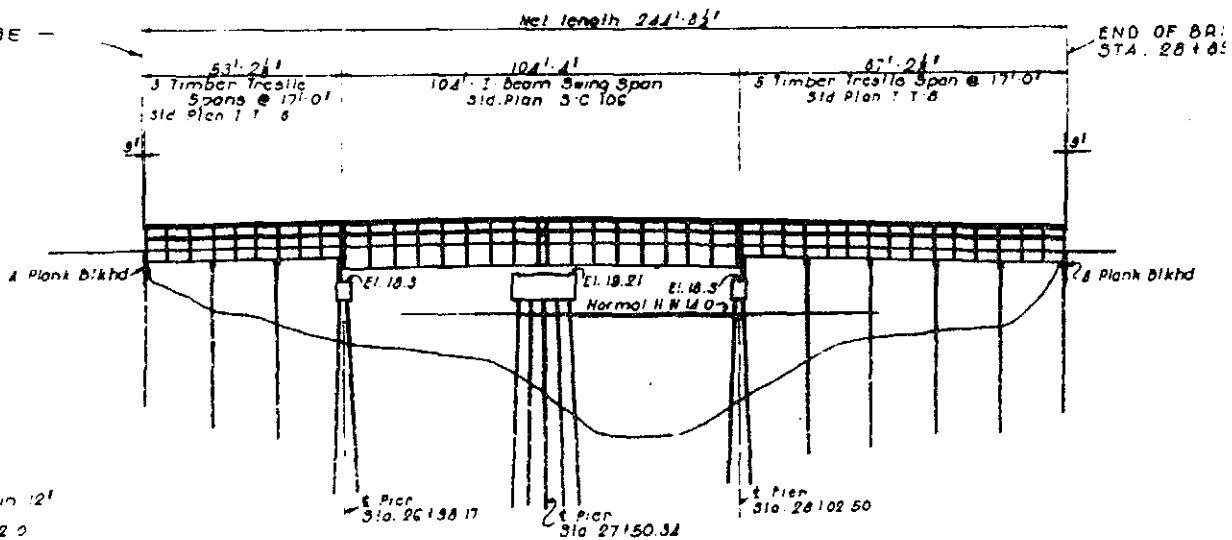
On a recent opening, it took five men to open the bridge and six to close it. The sixth man, a resident of the area, who was waiting to cross the bridge, remarked that his father had been the bridge tender at Ruth when he was a little boy and that, back then, it took only one man to open and close the bridge.

That was many years and, through those years, the Bayou Teche Bridge at Ruth had served the area well. It was well-suited to the scenic waterway that it crossed. It served the Ruth Sugar Company by providing a convenient place to cross the bayou, so that sugar products could be shipped by truck. It was easily movable, allowing boat traffic to pass down the Teche. It has the distinction of being built during the greatest period of road and bridge construction that Louisiana has ever seen and, for 50 years, has provided residents in the area a safe and quick crossing over Bayou Teche.





END OF BRIDGE -
STA. 26+25



3 M
Railroad spike in 12'
Hackberry Tree
35' 1" Sta. 26+2.0
El. 23.75

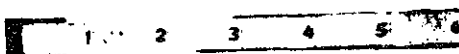
PROJECT NO. M-465
AT ROTH, LA.
GENERAL PLAN
BAYOU TECHE BRIDGE
LOUISIANA HIGHWAY COMMISSION
BAYOU BRIDGE, LA.

26+00

27+00

28+00

29+00



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